

[NEWS](#) | POSTED SEPTEMBER 1, 2026

COVID's Toll on Kids Was Milder Than Predicted, Six-Country Study Finds

PRESS RELEASE / CHILD DEVELOPMENT: For Immediate Release on September 1, 2026

PRESS RELEASE

Published

Tuesday, September 1, 2026

1:35pm

Children's Developmental
Trajectories in the Long Shadow
of COVID-19

Read the Child Development
Special Section

OXFORD ACADEMIC

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Setbacks were concentrated among children already facing other risks; most children recovered

Six years after COVID-19 disrupted childhood around the world, new research following the same children from before the pandemic through today finds that the damage was far less widespread than early warnings predicted. A Special Section in the journal *Child Development*, synthesizing 17 long-term studies across six countries, finds that most children's health, learning, social development, and wellbeing recovered substantially. Setbacks that persisted were concentrated among children who already faced other risks before the pandemic began.

Early studies of COVID-19, based on short-term data collected during the pandemic itself, warned of widespread and lasting harm to child development. This new research, tracking children over a longer period, tells a different story: pandemic impacts were real and wide-ranging, but not as severe as initially feared, and many effects weakened over time. The children who fared worst and recovered more slowly were disproportionately those shaped by pre-existing risks — not the pandemic alone.

These findings are featured in the Society for Research in Child Development's flagship journal, *Child Development*, in a Special Section on COVID-19 titled "[Children's Developmental Trajectories in the Long Shadow of COVID-19](#)." The Special Section is led by co-editors Anna D. Johnson (Georgetown University), Gabriela Livas (University of Texas, Austin), and Seth Pollak (University of Wisconsin-Madison).

"Overall, the evidence in this special section challenges dominant narratives of universal 'learning loss,' suggesting instead that COVID-19 interacted with existing inequalities," said co-editor Anna Johnson from Georgetown University. "The research highlights the resilience in children and shows the importance of context in shaping their physical, cognitive, and emotional skills over time."

Research articles from this Special Section are freely available at <https://academic.oup.com/chidev/issue> on the Oxford University Press website.

The Society for Research in Child Development advances the developmental sciences and promotes the use of developmental research to improve human lives.

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